NEWSWEEK
6 APRIL 1977

Back to Secret Diplomacy?

The State Department schedule made no mention of an impending visit by Anatoly Dobrynin. So when reporters spotted a black Cadillac Fleetwood with the license plate DPL-2 in the State Department garage one morning last week, they made some hasty inquiries. State Department spokesmen would confirm only that the Soviet ambassador was indeed in the building and that he and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance were discussing "a number of issues . . . including the [SALT] talks." One week after the stunning public collapse of the strategic arms limitation talks in Moscow, the U.S. and the Soviet Union had resumed their bargaining. This time, the two superpowers seemed determined to conduct their business in private.

They also seemed anxious to moderate the harsh words that had passed between them. At a dinner in the Kremlin for Cuba's Fidel Castro, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev complained that the Americans were "losing their constructive approach" on SALT, but he added that "a reasonable accommodation" was still possible. Three days later, President Carter told newsmen he had received private assurances from Brezhnev that the U.S.S.R. was serious about reaching a SALT agreement.

Encouraged: Carter hastily added that the message from Moscow was "nothing dramatic or startling," and that "no new concepts have been proposed." But he said he was encouraged by Vance's meeting with Ambassador Dobrynin. And the President revealed that the U.S. was reassessing its position in preparation for a possible resumption of the SALT talks in Geneva next month. If staff studies showed "any inequity" in the American arms proposal, he declared, "we would be very eager to change it."

From all sides, Carter was being urged to adopt more discreet tactics on SALT. Democratic Sen. Henry Jackson said the Administration should not have given its proposals "a public buildup" before Vance went to Moscow. Former President Ford said the Carter White House may have been guilty of too much optimism and too much "rhetoric" and may have miscalculated the Soviet reaction to its arms proposals. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger suggested that the negotiations "must proceed in a calm, nonconfrontational way." But the White House denied that it had miscalculated. Officials said Dobrynin had been informed in advance about the two new U.S. proposals on SALT, and it showed newsmen Vance's briefing books to prove that Russia's rejection of both plans had not been unexpected.

The Soviet Union was busy on a number of diplomatic fronts, but it seemed to be moving cautiously. When Yasir Arafat, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization, visited Moscow, he was granted an unprecedented meeting with Brezhnev himself. The visit produced no major shift in Kremlin policy on the Middle East, however, and Western analysts believed that the Russians were merely trying to stake out a role for themselves in Mideast peace negotiations. That also seemed to be the Soviet motive for the scheduled visit to Moscow late this week by Syrian President Hafez Assad.

Sipa

Brezhnev welcomes Castro: Room for 'reasonable accommodation'

Denial: Similarly, Castro's visit produced no signs of an increased Soviet offensive in Africa, despite fears that had already been aroused by the apparent Communist backing for an invasion of Zaïre (page 49). At the dinner for Castro, Brezhnev went out of his way to deny that Africa is "an arena of rivalry between socialist and capitalist countries."

In Washington, the White House took low-key positions on issues that could annoy the Soviet Union, as well as other nations. When the House of Representatives considered a strong human-rights amendment to a foreign-aid bill, the Administration argued, uncharacteristically, for softer language. The White House lost that battle, and the House passed a measure requiring U.S. representatives on international lending agencies to vote against most kinds of loans to countries that violate human rights.

The Administration also reacted mildly to violations of the new 200-mile limit by Soviet fishing boats. Three times in two weeks, Coast Guard crews boarded Soviet ships, charged them with violations and recommended that the vessels be seized. Each time, the State Department overruled the recommendation. One Russian ship was threatened with fines totaling $100,000, and Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher summoned the Soviet chargé d'affaires, Vladillen Vasev, to the State Department for a formal warning. But as the Administration moved quietly toward a more cautious and confidential diplomacy, it was clearly anxious not to rock the boat by taking any stronger action against the Russians.

—FAY WILLEY with FRED COLEMAN in Moscow and bureau reports

Red Shift

In Henry Kissinger's day, Western Europe's Communists were on the enemies list. Kissinger warned European governments against cooperating with them, and in secret the CIA spent millions trying to defeat Communist candidates at the polls. That policy failed to curb Marxist gains. Communists emerged as Italy's second largest party, and a Socialist-Communist coalition recently trounced centrist backers of French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Then, last week, Spain legalized its Communist Party for the first time since the civil war.

Faced with political realities, the Carter Administration has scrapped Kissinger's stand. U.S. diplomats have begun making tentative contacts with Communist leaders in Rome and Paris, and last week, the State Department issued a Delphic pronouncement on Eurocommunism. "We believe the position of a Communist Party in a particular country is a matter to be decided by the people and government concerned," declared spokesman Hodding Carter III. He emphasized the "great importance" Washington attaches to dealing with European governments whose "traditions, values and practices" are not alien to America's own. But the point was that the Administration has decided it must—and can—live with Western Europe's Communists.